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UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

# JOHN DAVIDSON

## A STUDY OF THE RELATION OF HIS IDEAS TO HIS POETRY

BY

HAYIM FINEMAN

A THESIS

PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR  
OF PHILOSOPHY

PHILADELPHIA, PA.

1916



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# I

John Davidson is one of a group of poets who began to attract attention in the eighteen nineties. He began to write at a time when the younger generation in England was living through a reaction against Victorian literature. The younger writers of the nineties, whether æsthetes, symbolists, realists, impressionists or Celts, agreed clearly in one respect—in reviling the taste that prevailed in Victorian England of the second and third quarters of the nineteenth century. They were all raised under the influence of Carlyle's anti-utilitarianism and Arnold's anti-philistinism, and disliked intensely what they conceived to be the mid-Victorian type. The mid-Victorian was to them a vulgar bourgeois—a narrow-minded, complacent, practical individual who "edified" himself by reading poetry and was shocked by the indecencies of Ibsen, Wagner and Zola; a person whose philosopher was Spencer because Spencer was so industriously careful; whose great intellectual novelist was Thackeray because his characters reminded one of the commonplace people that one might have met yesterday; whose great poet was Tennyson because he was abreast of the times and always compromised; whose essayist was Macaulay because he was an optimist who believed that a "practical" millennium was at hand; who created a Shakespeare in his own image, "bland, gentle, amiable," a theatrical man of bourgeois tastes prudently amassing a fortune and retiring to the country to live on his income; who tinkered with corn-law reforms and model prisons because he was too timid to remodel society; whose tragedy was of the Paul Dombey type; whose religion was compromisingly rational; his philosophy utilitarian; his politics liberal; his manners prudish—an old maid, stolid, serious, sentimental, provincial. It was a duty to discuss sex problems freely and shock this vulgar prude with epigrams and poses and with the selecting of degenerates for heroes in novels. Strange sins and subtle moods were accordingly created largely as a reaction against the matter-of-fact moralizings of the mid-Victorians.

The social and economical conditions in the eighteen nineties

were especially ripe for this anti-Victorian movement. There were, indeed, no new factors that had been previously inoperative; but conditions hitherto merely generally effective, now became more pronounced. The close of the century thus marked a more complete triumph, politically and even socially, of the upper wealthier elements of the middle classes. This brought about within the minds of the younger generation a more thorough down-breaking of class distinctions. The aristocracy in England, whose social position as a class had been steadily undermined throughout the nineteenth century by intermarriage with wealth, English and American, was now visibly losing in prestige and was looked up to less and less by the younger generation. Youths who belonged to the middle class no longer aspired to become successful bourgeois. They looked with contempt at their own class which had lost its class traditions, and at the aristocracy which was beginning more and more to resemble in all outward circumstances the wealthy bourgeois. The very word bourgeois began to be looked upon as a term of insult. Moreover the diffusion of education of a superficial kind likewise increased the rapidity of this dissolution of class ideals and intensified a general feeling of discontent. The new youth was thus prepared for all kinds of new movements in any way suggesting rebellion against the past. He found especially irritating the respect for the proprieties and the lack of daring in Victorian English life and frequently escaped his bourgeois surroundings by cultivating an intellectually aristocratic attitude. From an ivory tower the new aristocrat could look down with contempt on the stupidities of mankind, and was enabled in his solitary contemplations to violate mentally in a few epigrams all the moral laws men accept. In such environment a misapprehension of æstheticism, mysticism, and Baudelairism could flourish and have a crowd of admirers. Politically the completion of the triumph of the money element among the bourgeois was likewise productive of important changes. The exploitation of English capital in India and Africa fired the imagination of many; and made distasteful the "sober-suited freedom" of a Tennyson. England began to be thought of as mistress of the world with numerous sons encompassing the earth in Canada, India, Africa, Australia; Englishmen all, who had hived off and acquired new lands by taking up the white man's burden—hewing down for-

ests, building factories, exploiting and civilizing. Imperialist poetry in which England was conceived as the savior of mankind and the forlorn hope of the world accordingly began to be written. Economically, with the triumph of the capitalist element among the bourgeois, and with the increase of the unemployed, a class-conscious proletariat developed and with it came socialism and the writers on socialism. The social remedies of Carlyle and Ruskin, and the tinkering of liberal Victorian statesmen with factory laws became now, in the eyes of a growing element, short-sighted affairs and objects of derision. Moreover the internationalism of the socialists on the one hand, and the increasing intimacy of political relations with France on the other hand, made impossible the provincialism of a Tennyson. Finally, the continuous increase in the use of machinery and electricity, accompanied by an augmented knowledge of the nature of social evils, scotched the make-believe romanticism of the *Idylls of the King*, that was largely an outgrowth of a faint-hearted attempt at avoiding life. Realism became a dominating mode in fiction and drama; and the romanticism that survived began to have for this new generation a scientific or exact coloring. It either became symbolism, and this appealed to an age of increased intensity of commercial production because of the nerve-irritation that symbolic methods of double interpretation and aroused expectancy involved and implied; or else it became the romance of cruelty and tragic endings with occasional by-products of Wellsian science-romances and Davidsonian cosmological testaments.

As is evident from this rapid survey, a rebellion against Victorian taste was inevitable. The rebellion that did take place was, however, far from powerful. No really great creative poet appeared in the nineties. Not much more than a few subtle moods, and several epigrams and a tendency toward braver habits of thought, were actually produced. The poets were afraid or incapable of sustained effort and were, in the main, amateurs. As a result, notwithstanding the healthiness of their revolt, they failed to create anything as burly as the works of Carlyle or Dickens. They became merely rebels who played with revolution and half the time did not know what they wanted. When they began to know, they were swamped by influences from the continent, where a similar rebellion

was going on against the taste of the early mid-nineteenth century. Baudelaire, Ibsen, the French realists, mystics and symbolists became the great sources of inspiration; whence the derived quality of the poetry and prose of the period. This failure to produce a great literature should not blind us however to the fact that the English poets of the nineties accomplished a useful task: they certainly cleared the atmosphere of the prudishness, the insularity and the lack of courage of the Victorian period, though such a sweeping was necessarily accompanied by a histrionic assertiveness and a somewhat exaggerated sense of self-importance on the part of its authors.

John Davidson was one of a small number of independent minds of that period who had something to say on a grand scale. He had much in common with his contemporaries. He wrote empire verse and poems of London streets and poverty much in their manner. He participated in, and helped to determine, the direction of the rebellion against Victorianism. Intoxicated by ideas new to him and engaged in rebellion against the past, his own importance grew on him and his productions contain a swagger somewhat repelling. Similarly his conception of the Englishman as the Overman is a product of the imperialistic tendencies in the midst of which he lived. These are, however, mere perturbing details which serve to fix the period in which he worked. They do not make his writings any the less originally creative; for he had a point of view and a depth of emotion altogether his own: he tried to stem the tide of French influence and endeavored to construct a new basis for English poetry. Out of his own experience and the scientific thought of his own time he attempted to create "a new dwelling place for the human imagination." This he did with a passion and energy in the presence of which the writings of most of his contemporaries pale. Suspended in majestic agony his poetry rises across the firmament of the early twentieth century. It is titanic in conception. It is largely a poetry of liberation inspired by the desire to destroy all illusions that he thought animated the past; for nothing short of infinity would satisfy his imagination. Whether the poetry so created was really new, or the philosophy on which it is based was true, is open to question. There can be no doubt, however, that such assumptions on the part of Davidson brought out the best in him and gave his work a grandeur and intensity that is impressive.



## II

The elements in Davidson's work that individualize and distinguish it from other poetry are in evidence even in his earliest productions. Davidson in Scotland is, as yet, not a materialistic thinker; but the qualities that his early poems display are symptomatic of his later development. His nature poems are thus neither decorative nor précieux. They are the kind that would be composed by a poet who frankly adored woods firmly rooted in the turf for their own sake because they gave him simple pleasure rather than because they suggested to him a human mood or a pretty image. His rural scenes are hills with budding heather rising like "purple domes"; leas of throbbing color, and stretches of country in which daws are "tossing themselves into the air."<sup>1</sup> The materialistic quality in such scenes is the result largely of his not attempting to interpret spiritually the things he describes.<sup>2</sup> Landscapes are to him patches of gay color, and arouse within him no reflections beyond the expression of the physical pleasure of being out in the open. His love poetry is material in the same manner. Lovers awake in the morning and go out for a pleasant summer day in the woodlands; they sing and bathe; they dine in an arbor, gather rosebuds and berries, listen to the larks and wonder at the blueness of the sky; then night comes and they retire.<sup>3</sup> Back of all this there is no wistfulness or even intensity of passion. Love is conceived by Davidson externally and is to him a Cytherean Aphrodite "all one blush and glance of passion"; fruitful, material, cos-

<sup>1</sup> *In a Music Hall*: "Kennoul Hill," p. 94; "On a Hill Top," p. 88; "A May Morning," p. 77, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Vide conclusion of "A Wood in Autumn" (*ibid.*, p. 65):

"Whether they mourned their tarnished ragged dress,

Or comrades fallen before the woodman's axe

I know not; only this, I heard them sing."

<sup>3</sup> "For Lovers" (*ibid.*, pp. 69-76).

mic. Anselm and Bianca die in the martyrdom of love;<sup>4</sup> the Queen of Thule kills and is slain for love's sake;<sup>5</sup> but all this happens unaffectedly without any mouthings of passion or the expression of poignant pain. Love is to the poet a process the effects of which are to be studied objectively.<sup>6</sup>

The dramas composed in Scotland are similarly symptomatic of his later growth. In the main they are all frankly plays full of word rivalries and midsummer-night fantasies. They are the product of a mind overflowing with energy and rejoicing in the consciousness of its powers and they have all the freshness and daring of adolescence. Their frolicsomeness and fantasy contain, however, no spirituality. The fairies in *An Unhistorical Pastoral* as well as Bacchus and Ariadne in *Scaramouch in Naxos* are of this earth; they are not woven of finer stuff than some of the mortals they mingle with. The emotions portrayed are genuine enough but there are no magic casements in the plays and the youthful lovers have no fine frenzies. There is, instead, a deftness of wit, a nimbleness of fancy and a certain burliness to be met in his love and nature poems. This absence of spirituality is again accompanied by a certain metaphysical quality. Whole plays are written as if to demonstrate that "there is no life at all, but love."<sup>7</sup> It is this metaphysical attitude that perhaps partly accounts for Davidson's unsuccessful character drawing in his plays and novels; for Davidson is really interested in general principles rather than in individuals. Cinthio and Rupert are accordingly made to vie with each other in the praise of their respective mistresses; Ringan Dean bursts out with the lyrical "Where have you been to-day Annie Smith?"; but neither lovers nor mistresses become individualized human beings. Even in *Scaramouch in Naxos*, Davidson's greatest dramatic achievement, the effectiveness depends on the capriciousness of fancy, and on the satire on human grossness in the mass rather than on any successful character creation.

Davidson displays however in these dramas at most only a metaphysical attitude rather than any distinct philosophy of life; for in

<sup>4</sup> "Anselm and Bianca" (*ibid.*, pp. 36-44).

<sup>5</sup> "The Queen of Thule" (*ibid.*, pp. 115-20).

<sup>6</sup> Vide also "Is Love Worth Learning?" (*ibid.*, p. 53) and "A Sail" (*ibid.*, p. 68).

<sup>7</sup> "Anselm and Bianca" (*ibid.*, p. 47).

Scotland he has as yet no important thoughts to reveal. Only one of the plays, the semi-autobiographical tragic farce *Smith*, contains thought that can in any way be described as philosophic. It expresses the poet's hatred for "mental boot-blackening," his youthful ambitions for fame, and his feeling that one must be fanatic "to smite a passage through a close-fisted world."<sup>8</sup> "Smith" thus epitomizes all that is truly great to Davidson. He is the impatient man of genius fighting the world. He obeys nature and not authority, he exclaims against

"The most inhuman, the most ungodly word,  
Sinner"<sup>9</sup>

and denounces

The hydra-headed creeds; the sciences,  
That deem the thing is known when it is named;  
And literature, thought's palace prison fair;  
Philosophy, the grand inquisitor  
That racks ideas and is fooled with lies.<sup>10</sup>

These sentiments, though significant because they suggest a point of view that subsequently matures in his ballads and testaments, can hardly with fairness be considered the product of keen thought. They read more like the adolescent hysterics of a youth quivering with the desire of revolutionizing belief and deciding at one stroke world-problems. Their significance lies not so much in their thought value as in the fact that they reveal a metaphysical bent of mind that ultimately produces materialistic poetry.

This philosophic attitude apparent in "Smith" becomes especially evident in Davidson's poetical character sketches that appeared in *In a Music Hall*. Lily Dale, thirty and plump, contriving to bring out "the meaning that tickles";<sup>11</sup> Airshire Jock made a poet by whiskey and Burns;<sup>12</sup> Stanley Trafford, "the Sentimental Star," who once loved the "star-veiled truth";<sup>13</sup> are not mere matter-of-fact studies. They are all created because the poet is interested in explaining their souls. The "diameter" of things or the meaning of life is indeed the problem that gradually becomes more

<sup>8</sup> "Smith" (Plays, p. 230).

<sup>9</sup> "Smith" (*ibid.*, p. 232).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 236.

<sup>11</sup> *In a Music Hall*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 45-9.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 7-9.

and more significant to Davidson and determines the nature and character of his poetry.

Davidson's early productions thus reveal three chief qualities: an interest in solid things in his nature poems that is somewhat earthy and later develops into materialism; a playfulness of imagination and ingenuity of word play in his dramas that mature in his novels and are transformed in his later work into passionate rhetorical qualities; and a metaphysical bent that ripens into his later concepts of materialistic monism. He has as yet no significant thoughts to offer; though a few poems in which he pleads for the empire of love suggest something of the propagandist that develops in the Testaments and the Plays. He has as yet not found a powerful vehicle for expression and he has only a few simple vivid impressions to transmit into poetry. This absence of any profound thought would not in itself imply an inferiority in poetic powers of any other writer. The productions of a poet need not necessarily contain a philosophic system of thought. Anything in his stream of consciousness that becomes vital to him, the poet may arrest and transfigure into a poem. He may convey an idea or sentiment that he feels intensely; he may dazzle with a patch of color; or he may flash the dumb agony of a soul; and, provided he succeeds in arousing by appropriate words and rhythm a reciprocal vivid response on the part of the reader, he has created a poem. Whether he selects metaphysical themes, or expresses his sheer delight in color, sound, or movement depends solely on the kind of things that are real to him. Davidson was, however, the type of poet whose greatest source of emotion and whose most vital experiences were derived from a consciousness of things that may be called philosophical. This absence of keen thought in Davidson's early work involved therefore a lack of profound consciousness of life and consequently the production of a poetry not altogether convincing. His mastery over utterance was moreover imperfect. Crude phrases like "My heart is burning, It scorches me"<sup>14</sup> (which Davidson later corrected in *Godfrida*) occur occasionally. He lacked the compactness, the gauntness, and the strength that some of his later poems display. In the presence of the blaze of his later work these poems produced in Scotland become pallid; their playfulness appears frivolity; and their denunciations sound shrill. He had how-

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

ever an abundance of creative power, a nimbleness of fancy, and the freshness and daring of youthfulness. He was moreover in love with sunshine and solid things and was, above all, intensely genuine.

### III

With such tastes and proclivities Davidson arrived in London in 1890, determined to create for himself a literary career. In "A Would-be-Londoner"<sup>15</sup> he later described banteringly the advent of ambitious young Scotchmen who came to conquer the town with their brilliancy; and in the *Fleet Street Eclogues* he hinted at the hell of writing for bread that such young men frequently experienced. "Nine tenths" of his time in London, as he complained towards the close of his life, "was wasted in the endeavor to earn a livelihood."<sup>16</sup> His time was spent largely in offering contributions to *The Glasgow Herald*, *The Speaker*, *The Yellow Book* and *The Chap-Book*, and in writing romances, short stories, sketches and dramatizations. Though these numerous productions are hardly representative of what he wanted to do or could do, yet they reveal quite clearly what was going on within him. Stimulated by his readings of continental authors and by his instinctive opposition to much of the literature produced in contemporary England, he was clarifying his attitude toward the art of poetry and was also gradually forming a consistent philosophy of life that later became uniquely his own.

Traces of the growth of his ideas are to be found even in the five novels that he published in London. None of these novels really displays Davidson's powers at their highest; though, as Mr. O'Brien pointed out, they are at least as good as *The Napoleon of Nottingham Hill*, and certainly anteceded and must have suggested the creation of such types of fiction. They read like the prosings of an active mind overflowing with creative energy. They are picturesque tales of heroes who follow out, in the Don Quixote manner, a particular pose or point of view with a mad-like persistency; their effectiveness depending not on the insight into life displayed by the characters, which is but slight, but on an overflow of hurly burly wit and on an inexhaustible supply of word-play, prattle, epigram, paradox

<sup>15</sup> *Miss Armstrong's and Other Circumstances*, pp. 32-43.

<sup>16</sup> *Triumph of Mammon*, p. 151.

and absurd situations. But beneath the extended practical jokes and delicious nonsense of the tales there is an unmistakable serious intent. *A Practical Novelist* is a travesty on novel writing in general. The hero, Maxwell Lee, in the company of Briscoe, an intoxicated Sancho Panza, tries to perform a novel in actual life and deliberately becomes a villain in order to study the effects produced by his arbitrary literary conduct on real people. *Baptist Lake* is composed partly in order to ridicule the taste for paradox and preciosity and indirectly demonstrates among other things the inferiority of successful men. *Earl Lavender* not merely attacks the principle of Evolution but the numerous young men who come out every day with something they consider new and revolutionary, "fantastical creatures made what they are by the pseudo-philosophy, feeble poetry and foolish fiction" of the day. These tales thus reveal more than a passion for the paradox of the early nineties that finds its most brilliant expression in Wilde. They display a mind that disbelieves in art for art's sake and exhibit, through a veil of fantastic fooling, a materialistic attitude that is essentially almost philosophical. The genuineness and the metaphysical tastes already evident in the poetry he composed in Scotland are hardening in London into definite principles.

The serious elements back of these stories, though pronounced, are, however, rather weak. The author is too much in good humor with himself and the world to take things too thoughtfully. His moral earnestness is not deep. It does not extend beyond admiration for the magnanimity and adventuresomeness of adolescence and dislike for pettiness and pretentiousness. The horse play digressions are so numerous that the reader often loses sight of the point of the author's ridicule and of the seriousness of thought that underlies his work. Davidson's ideas are conveyed directly and unequivocally only in the numerous prose essays, sketches and dialogues that he composes in this period. Many of these prose contributions appeared in the files of half forgotten magazines and were published in volume form at a later period. Some of these reflections were exhumed from periodicals in *The Man Forbid and Other Essays* edited by Mr. O'Brien; others were published in *Paragraphs and Sentences*; and the most valuable were selected by Davidson himself and published in 1903 with a few slight, easily distinguishable changes in *A Rosary*.

There can be but little doubt that when Davidson wrote these

reflections, essays, sketches and imaginary interviews, he was at least externally influenced by Nietzsche and Ibsen. In *Paragraphs and Sentences* Davidson thus introduces to English readers Nietzsche's views on conscience, compassion, gratitude and woman. Nietzsche's method of expression through aphorisms, iterated suggestions and ironical similes seems especially to appeal to him; and he experiments accordingly in writing maxims of his own in the manner of Nietzsche on the difficulty of detaching one's proper thought from the mass of ideas obtained from others, and on the importance of realizing that dignity is impudence. He proceeds, furthermore, to analyze in the Nietzschean fashion various authors and finds fault with Carlyle's hypocrisy and with the naked realism of Zola. Even in *A Random Itinerary*, which is primarily a series of sketches of London parks and suburbs, he frequently breaks up a description of reposeful upland hamlets by introducing an imaginary disputant in order to be enabled to praise Ibsen, "that great Scotchman,"<sup>17</sup> and denounce the factitious decadence that exists only "in the fancies of a few."<sup>18</sup> This influence that Nietzsche and Ibsen exert on Davidson is largely, however, in the manner of a propelling factor that goads him on to form opinions of his own on poetry, based in the main on the opposition to preciosity to be met with in his novels and on an emphasis of his own growing metaphysical tastes.

Poetry, according to the Davidson of the eighteen nineties, must have two chief characteristics: it must be genuine and must aim to express the heart of things. By the word genuine Davidson implies something that springs directly from experience and observation of life.<sup>19</sup> The poet must keenly feel something conveyed from the world that is actual to him, which experience he transmutes into poetry. There can therefore be no "art for art's sake"; for technique must express something, and this something must be the experience vital to the poet and not the abstract pleasure of mere expression. Moreover, since poetry is an empiric "stating the world afresh," it follows that neither Tennyson nor Browning is a genuine poet. Tennyson and Browning, according to Davidson, really did not feel things genuinely: they looked upon life through Shake-

<sup>17</sup> *A Random Itinerary*, p. 186.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *The Man Forbid and Other Essays*, p. 67.

spearean eyes and saw men "as trees walking."<sup>20</sup> Tennyson, who was a master artificer rather than artist, described "confections of passions for use in ladies' seminaries" and hid his head like the fabled ostrich "in some sand-bed of Arthurian legend."<sup>21</sup> Browning, "the boy's poet par excellence,"<sup>22</sup> was not without a certain limited intensity,<sup>23</sup> but owing to "a frantic terrified optimism" he did not have the courage to think honestly and took shelter in the "paradoxical optimism of *The Ring and the Book*."<sup>24</sup> Indeed perhaps the only poets since Shakespeare who really wrote poetry that was a genuine outgrowth of their experience were Burns, "whose eyes were open"; Wordsworth, who had a keen insight into the true character of the world; and Blake, whose eyes were likewise open for a time. The poems of James Thomson and Hood's "Song of the Shirt" are, in their place, the chief poetic creations of the nineteenth century that will command attention precisely because both poets sang of the actualities of life. They trusted themselves and saw with their own eyes.<sup>25</sup>

Such a conception of poetry does not imply that poets, in order to be "genuine," must limit themselves to writing on the woman in unwomanly rags or on steam and electricity. Literature has indeed other functions besides voicing the misery aroused at the sight of suffering millions;<sup>26</sup> its theme may be heroic fables or the beauty of the moon. There is thus room and to spare for a poet like Mr. Yeats, who describes people of the Faerie Hills, provided the poet does not treat faery lore in the manner of an antiquarian but because faery lore is to him a living experience.<sup>27</sup>

Poetry, according to Davidson, must, moreover, not merely be genuine; it must also express the heart of things. It is never matter-of-fact reproduction of life. It is fundamentally an offering of "the wine of life in chased goblets," instead of flinging the mere "bunches plucked from the stem."<sup>28</sup> It is true "romance" that consists not in avoiding modern life but in presenting its most significant elements, the very "diameter" of things.<sup>29</sup> There is therefore no room in great art for the types of realism of a Zola or a

<sup>20</sup> *A Rosary*, p. 37.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185.

<sup>27</sup> *The Man Forbid and Other Essays*, pp. 94-5.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>28</sup> *Godfrida*, p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>29</sup> *A Rosary*, p. 83.



Thackeray, who offers "impressions of the surface of passing phases of modern life,"<sup>30</sup> or for the mood of a Keats, who cries shame on the memory of Newton because "he had destroyed all the poetry of the rainbow by reducing it to the prismatic colours."

Davidson's views on the technique of poetry proceed from the same standpoint. Since poetry springs directly from living experience, "liberty of utterance" and "spontaneity" should be the mark of the highest poetry.<sup>31</sup> The greatest form of liberty can be obtained, however, only under restraint. Because a poet submits to meters and rhythm he can thus rise above common sense and ordinary processes of ratiocination and express himself more immediately. Othello's image

Like to a Pontic sea  
Whose icy current and compulsive course  
Never knows the tiring ebb, but keeps due on  
To the Propontic and the Hellespont;  
Even so my bloody thoughts, with violent pace  
Shall ne'er look back, ne'er ebb to humble love  
Till that a capable and wide revenge  
Swallow them up

reduced to prose could not be read "with a sober face." "It is the meter, the lightning dance of it, that lays common sense under a spell," and makes possible a spontaneous expression of poetry.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore the narrative and dramatic forms that involve the most numerous restraints are the forms that enable the greatest type of spontaneity.<sup>33</sup> When a poet writes a lyric poem he is partly ashamed for taking the world into his confidence and poses slightly.<sup>34</sup> In the drama and narrative, however, all fear and responsibility of feeling and utterance are removed, because the sentiments expressed are attributed to a character conceived under definite limitations, and the utterance of the poet thus becomes freer and fuller. For similar reasons the great discovery of Elizabethan dramatists was the madman, for such a character made possible the greatest liberty of expression.<sup>35</sup>

Entertaining such attitudes towards poetry, which are in the main descriptive of his own tendencies as a poet, Davidson is bound

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>31</sup> *The Man Forbid and Other Essays*, p. 125.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 158-60.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 128-30.

to find fault with most of the contemporary criticism of literature. Thus he denies the very possibility of the art of literary criticism.<sup>36</sup> If art can spring only directly from experience and is not genuine when it is a literary echo, then it follows that one can give an account artistically of poetry only by means of painting or music or any other art that involves the use of a medium other than words; for literary criticism of literature can at most be an echo and of no higher value than imitative verse. Instead of literary criticism one might however write a criticism of literature. The test of such criticism should be experience of life rather than the comparative method which is of value only as a subsidiary aid in dealing with the growing mass of "imitative verse." "Poetry," explains Davidson, "is the product of originality of a first-hand experience and observation of life, of direct communion with men and women, with the seasons of the year, with day and night. The critic will therefore be well advised, if he have the good fortune to find something that seems to him poetry, to lay it out in the daylight and the moonlight, to take it into the street and the fields, to set against it his own experience and observation of life and should he be a poet himself, to remember how it was that he wrote his own poetry."<sup>37</sup> Criticism of this type is still almost in its infancy. "It reaches its teens perhaps in Matthew Arnold; and is not yet out of them."<sup>38</sup> It is however useful; for, whether offered by friend or enemy, it encourages authors who have "small or fluctuating constituencies" in their struggle for existence in the minds of others.<sup>39</sup>

These conclusions offered by Davidson largely in reviews and in dialogues, that are a literary apotheosis of the modern interview, may not impress one at the present moment in the midst of the proclamations of imagists and futurists as striking critical departures. They are not even altogether original. Davidson's conception of poetry as an empiric "stating the world afresh" and his advice to the critic that in testing poetry he "set it against his own experience and observation of life" resemble rather closely Carlyle's dicta that "it is the essence of the poet to be new" and that the true measure of poetry is "human nature and the nature of things at large." Davidson's attitude towards matter-of-fact imitations

<sup>36</sup> *A Rosary*, p. 185.

<sup>37</sup> *The Man Forbid and Other Essays*, p. 67.

<sup>38</sup> *A Rosary*, p. 94.

<sup>39</sup> *A Rosary*, p. 97.

of life, his plea for genuineness of emotion, his belief in the transforming powers of meter, and even his insistence on the need of presenting the "diameter" of life through direct communion, can hardly be considered new offerings to critical theory. The conclusions that he draws by ruthlessly applying such principles to contemporary literature are, however, decidedly striking. In the eighteen-nineties they certainly marked an independent thought contribution: for at that time it required great mental courage for a young man who opposed Victorian taste and ideals to fly in the face of both Wilde's garbling of French æstheticism and Mr. Moore's importation of French naturalism. Both of these importations were in their time healthy reactions against restraining qualities in Victorian literature. Wilde's "nature imitates art far more than art imitates nature" was a battle against Ruskin's conception of the mechanical imitation of nature and against that Victorian evaluation of things that made critics consider Dickens a great writer because his novels were ethically useful. The naturalism of a Mr. Moore was similarly a recoil from the Victorian romantic feeling that everything which was contemporary was ugly. They were at bottom assertions in favor of the larger freedom and vitality of poetry. Davidson, though resisting the repressing qualities in Victorian literature, realized however that art for art's sake was untenable and led to a divorce from life; and that art for truth's sake led to surface impressions and a starving of the imagination; and he offered instead (without however actually using Mr. Ransome's formula) art for life's sake—art that has no ulterior purpose beyond a sincere interpretation or imaginative recreation of the significant things in actual life. He thus became a forerunner of the recent theorists of new poetry. What differentiates him largely from these theorists and from his contemporaries is his conception of what is significant in modern life. For his selection of significant elements in the eighteen nineties is not based on objective study but rather on analysis of the elements important to him. His very opposition to æstheticism is due to his interest in material things already displayed in his work in Scotland, and the form of his opposition to naturalism is likewise an outgrowth of his own metaphysical tastes. Like a true metaphysician, the search for ultimate causes only, is to him significant; whence his abhorrence of mere matter-of-fact reproductions of details of life.

The poetry that Davidson composes in the early nineties is largely an almost literal application of his theories. Even from the standpoint of form, though he does not produce any plays and rarely goes beyond the restraint of the iambic in his metrical experiments, yet he tries to express himself spontaneously according to the principles laid down in his theories; and therefore writes but rarely simple lyrics like "In Romney Marsh."<sup>40</sup> Instead he employs forms like the eclogue, ballad and dramatic monologue, through which he can convey lyric emotion through a superficial objectivity and thus obtain what he considers a freedom of utterance. The eclogue and ballad thus become his special instruments after being slightly modified to suit his needs. In the eclogue, as adapted by Davidson, he is enabled to indulge in digressions and produce a crescent growth of mood by means of passionate choral outbursts on the part of loosely conceived imaginary characters. The thought moreover can be dropped, resumed, and varied at pleasure; alternations of lyric and hortatory passages can be introduced and the length of the verse be varied to suit the mood. All this can be done without the author speaking in his own name and, therefore, according to Davidson's theory, frankly and unrestrainedly. Similarly the ballad in his hand lends itself to a thinly veiled subjective relation of a simple story by bounds and leaps. Textual repetitions, colloquial phraseology, and a simple phrasing add to the feeling of spontaneity. The poet moreover expresses his own views on life in the cloak of anonymity. The dramatic monologue that involves an objectivity more profound, he uses, however, more sparingly. An occasional success like "Thirty Bob a Week" notwithstanding, it was not till later in life when he composed his Testaments, that the dramatic monologue became in his hands a really powerful means of expression.

The themes of the poems are in further harmony with his theories. They are all directly an outgrowth of the effects produced on the poet by contemporary life. The charm of the poems of course depends partly on the novelty of causing Fleet Street reporters to sing eclogues, and of rendering psychologic tales in ballad form. But what impresses one most is the poet's determination to sing courageously of modern things. This daring of tone is conveyed not merely in phrases like "served up hot to God,"<sup>41</sup> and in

<sup>40</sup> *Ballads and Songs*, p. 107.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

the use of Christianity as a decorative myth,<sup>42</sup> but in the very selection of themes. The dauntlessness of a betrayed soul in hell that knew no fear and walked out;<sup>43</sup> the courage of the clerk who faced the music and refused to believe that it was all "luck and toss";<sup>44</sup> and the passionate cry of

We are too young to fall to dust  
And too unsatisfied to die<sup>45</sup>

is bound to meet with response because one feels that the author is not shrinking from actualities and is dealing passionately with significant things. Characteristically enough, the modern things significant to Davidson are however always philosophical questions. In the eclogues reporters meet in London fog under smoky skies not merely to sing of speckled thrushes and primroses but to argue violently on art, heredity and world problems. In the *Ballads and Songs* the chief themes are the meaning of heaven, hell and creeds. These are the things most vital to him; they constitute his conception of "romance" or the "diameter" of things. He indeed pauses to interpret the pathos of a laborer's wife who married on the sly,<sup>46</sup> and he sings of trains<sup>47</sup> and shrieking steam.<sup>48</sup> But even in such moods it is not the passing vision of ordinary joys and sorrows that haunts his imagination but rather the queries that lie back of it. Human beings are not treated realistically; they are of interest only in so far as they represent to the poet a certain philosophical attitude. They are all searching for the meaning of life.

It is this quest for the "meaning of day and night," barren though it be for the time being of any profound conceptions, that gives to his poetry of the eighteen nineties an intensity that was wanting in his earlier work. Nature in the *Fleet Street Eclogues* is no longer to Davidson a mere joyous catalogue of trees and flowers and hedgerows white with May. It has a new vitality; trembling day puts on "a saffron wedding dress,"<sup>49</sup> and laburnums open in "thunder showers of greenish gold";<sup>50</sup> for the poet is on the verge of understanding "the passion of the grass that grows."<sup>51</sup> It is moreover this feeling that nature is about to say something mo-

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, "Ballad of Heaven," "Ballad of Hell," etc.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>49</sup> *Fleet Street Eclogues*, p. 70.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

mentous that makes so effective the continuous inroads of the descriptions of landscape into the midst of passionate discussions on art and evolution by the characters in the eclogues. Similarly in *Ballads and Songs* where the nature passages are largely used as a background, day coming "like a flood"<sup>52</sup> and the sun "taking heaven by storm"<sup>53</sup> are not merely decorative; they are integral parts of the endeavor in the poem to interpret the significant things in life. The nun who probes life's dearest meaning thus becomes "sister to day and night."<sup>54</sup>

It should be emphasized, however, that what impresses one in these poems is Davidson's mental attitudes rather than any actual thought expressed. In the *Fleet Street Eclogues* the predominating tone is that the world is still alive and there is no cause for despair; for great is man and great are the simple things of life and great is England.<sup>55</sup> This attitude alternates with a passion for treading on "unpaven ground" that must have been heightened by his absence from Scotland. In the *Ballads and Songs* similarly the poet exhorts the world to destroy the man-killing creeds and accept gayly its fate by not being afraid of life.<sup>56</sup> Such sentiments full of battle and daring exhilarate when passionately uttered. The thought offered by Davidson in support of these attitudes is however weak. The criticism of creeds in "The Exodus from Houndsditch" is narrow, as Davidson himself partly realized in his later poems. The "Ballad of a Nun"<sup>57</sup> may be significant as a passionate assertion of the joy of life; but in the form offered by Davidson it is rather an outburst of hysteria. In fact Davidson's greatest depth of thought is sounded in a passage that contains a Nietzschean mood like

So let us think we are the tortured nerves  
Of Being in travail with a higher type.<sup>58</sup>

His predominating ideal is seemingly expressed in the "Ballad of the Making of the Poet":

I am a man apart  
A mouth piece for creeds of all the world  
.  
.  
.  
A martyr for all the mundane moods to bear.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>52</sup> *Ballads and Songs*, p. 54.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>55</sup> "St. George's Day," in *Fleet Street Eclogues*.

<sup>56</sup> "Ballad in Blank Verse," "The Exodus from Houndsditch," etc. in *Ballads and Songs*.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>58</sup> *Fleet Street Eclogues*, p. 153.

<sup>59</sup> *Ballads and Songs*, p. 34.

Such an attitude is hardly tenable and Davidson later rejected it. It betrays the fact that Davidson in the early nineties is still a poet in the making. He has gained strength in London by grappling courageously with a few ideas. He has discovered a few forms of expression suitable to his powers and has accordingly stormed passionately against a world that he found intolerable. In *A Random Itinerary* and in his poems he moreover revealed an increased sensitiveness and tenderness for landscape as well as a courageous love of life. His senses and feelings have indeed become deeper and richer because he was becoming more definitely a philosophical poet; but his thoughts were still immature.

His growth as a thinker becomes evident however in the works he publishes at the close of the nineteenth century. He is then still not a philosophic thinker, but he becomes more definitely Nietzschean and more materialistic in his thought; and the moods that he conveys in his poems are at least consistent. In the *New Ballads* and in *The Last Ballad and Other Poems* the *amor fati* hitherto intermittent becomes more pronounced and the poet insists definitely that the battle is for the strong and that the hero is he who will fight and is above the laws that overawe the world.<sup>60</sup> Davidson pretends no longer to be "a trembling lyre for every wind to sound";<sup>61</sup> and this growth in definiteness of thought is accompanied in many of the new poems by a greater poetical intensity. In the main he composes more impassioned eclogues; his grasp of significant details in the ballads becomes firmer; and his nature poetry more fervently meaningful. The morning sings of courage and hope and of the glory of being mighty and alone. The sun rises in his valor and fights the clouds "pressing the mountains to his burning breast."<sup>62</sup> Not merely does he describe the earth in human terms but interprets human qualities in earthy terms. He sings of the gray earth of the brain and of the red earth burning in the heart.<sup>63</sup> "Feel yourself a part of earth," Davidson exhorts us; for there is a meaning underlying all matter: the mirth of summer rain

<sup>60</sup> Vide "Piper Play" in *New Ballads* and "Battle," "The Hero," "The Pioneer," etc., in *The Last Ballad and Other Poems*.

<sup>61</sup> *Ballads and Songs*.

<sup>62</sup> "Matinees" in *The Last Ballad and Other Poems*.

<sup>63</sup> "Earth to Earth," *ibid.*, p. 111.

is translated by the earth into terms of growth; man is part of this growth; and all matter is aching to become man.

A similar increase in profundity of ideas is displayed in the dramas that he writes between 1898 and 1900. These are not, like his plays composed in Scotland, full of the mad humors of youth; but they are based on deeper thought and consequently characters are constructed and scenes are conceived with a keener understanding of life. Davidson the dramatist sees in this world two kinds of human beings: those that are brain-sick and those that are healthy. The brain-sick suffer from jealousy, meanness, conviction of sin, and lack of heroic daring. They are malicious, underhand, and full of intrigue. The healthy dare to seize happiness: they are frank, impulsive, brave, look facts in the face, and know how to confront death joyously. Three things in life are especially dear to them: power and love and the glory of the material things of this world; and as long as they are faithful to their own instincts they triumph. In *Godfrida* the straightforwardness of Siward and Godfrida, whose love is absolute, reduces into impotence the intrigues of Isembert and Ermengarde. In *The Knight of the Maypole* hero and heroine likewise know of no mean submission; they are fiery, impulsive and battle against malice and deceit until they are victorious. In *Self's the Man* the chief character Urban is similarly of heroic metal. His greatest dream is

But to be tensely strung and give response  
Full souled to every pang of pleasure and pain;  
To be impassioned always and not to die.<sup>64</sup>

His presence makes the air electric, for no one can tell what he will say or do. He finally proposes, with absolute indifference to the cost of life involved, to make out of Lombardy a sword that will stem barbarous invasions. As he does not consult the old and places young men at the helm, he would have succeeded in his enterprise were it not that he started his career with a compromise. He dared not live openly with Saturnia because he was afraid of the opinion of the world, and had married Osmunda for the sake of policy. He thus depended on others rather than on his instincts and the world triumphed. For tragedy, as conceived by Davidson, is not a prod-

<sup>64</sup> *Self's the Man*, p. 87.



uct of conscience or environment: it is the result of mistrust of one's instincts and a consequent failure to take advantage of opportunities that do not recur.

This semi-Nietzschean conception of ethics on which the plays are based is responsible for many limitations in his dramatic art. One feels that the author frequently limits his sympathetic understanding of certain minor characters because of a too rigid forcing of life into the mould of his philosophy. It is only in a play like *Self's the Man*, in which Davidson triumphs sufficiently over his philosophy to make out of Osmunda and Philip not sick-brained characters but bits of frail humanity, that he produces a drama that is intensely human. Moreover the chief appeal that these plays make depends not on their Nietzschean ethics but on motives like the thwarting of the plans of a courageous mind or the triumph of brave lovers over obstacles—elements as old as literature. Yet the progress in dramatic power revealed in his dramas of 1898–1900 is due not merely to a riper experience brought about by practice in translating and adapting plays for the London stage. Though the Nietzschean thought embodied in those dramas does occasionally seduce the author into producing artificial type characters, in the main it heightens his critical understanding of life. It gives him a consistent philosophic vantage and an intenser zest of life which enhance his dramatic skill. Davidson's objective attitude towards love and nature which one meets in his earlier work is thus converted in its passage through a temperament like Davidson's into a poetry more intense because it is based on a growing philosophic understanding. His theories notwithstanding, Davidson of the eighteen nineties was but a minor poet; because the significant thing to him was the mere search for the meaning of things. Not until this quest is satisfied by his discovering a philosophic cause that explains to him the origin and significance of all phenomena does he produce really mature verse. This he achieves towards the close of the century when he can finally look down from a philosophic height and reflect that

We are fire,  
Cut off and cooled awhile; and shall return,  
The earth and all thereon that live and die,  
To be again candescent in the sun,

Or in the sun's intenser, purer source.

Arise and let us sing; and, singing, build  
A tabernacle even with these ghastly bones.

#### IV

This philosophic vantage ground attained by Davidson at the close of the century becomes not only his theme but the great source of his inspiration and is the direct cause of his strength and of his weakness as a poet. He approaches the problem of the uprearing of the tabernacle from the constructive critical point of view. As he keeps on writing, poetry gradually begins to mean more to him than a mere search for the meaning of life and a spontaneous expression of vivid impressions: he begins to realize that its intrinsic value is determined by the quality of the emotional understanding of such meaning and by the kind of imaginative power that receives the given impressions. The first essential of a poet is of course to be honest and render what he feels at first hand; but if the freedom and imperiousness of his imaginative powers are limited by ignorance and shallowness of emotional depth the poet will produce things insignificant and imitative. "Poetry is the will to live and the will to power, poetry is the empire. Poetry is life and force."<sup>65</sup> The great poet is a tyrant who tries to impose upon the world his own imagination and compels others to think and feel in his manner.<sup>66</sup> Thus, according to Davidson, Wordsworth tried to create a Nature Worship; he projected his own soul and character into the world and wanted to substitute for Christendom a William Wordsworthdom. Therein lay his greatness. Similarly Carlyle proclaimed himself in his heroes and tried to create a cult of great men. But Carlyle's conception of the world is too narrow—"Carlyledom is a strait-jacket for the world and a dusty way to death and to the dull hell of the drill sergeant and the knout"; and Wordsworthdom is parochial; it has no room for great passionate romance, for a Napoleon or Wagner. Neither of the two had the kind of imaginative power that might serve as "an enduring habitation for the spirit of an era."<sup>67</sup> In the entire range of English literature there

<sup>65</sup> *Holiday and Other Poems*, p. 149.

<sup>66</sup> *The Theocrat*, p. 13.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

are indeed but few great poets who had supreme imaginations. Shakespeare had one of those minds. He lived in Christendom; and accepted Heaven and Hell and the entire religion and morality of his day; his imagination living passionately, "more intensely than that of any other man," within those limits. The intensity of the freedom of that imagination "beating against the bars of religion and morality" accordingly still astounds the world.<sup>68</sup> There was Milton whose austere imagination, though frequently atrophied into dogma, yet, tempered by the humanity of a Shakespeare, created the love of Adam and Eve and the rebellion of Satan. Dryden's imagination merely "beat the air in strong low-pitched flight" through Anglicanism and the "hot-house Catholicism of James"; Pope's imagination could never mount beyond the Rosicrucian doctrine of spirits.<sup>69</sup> With Burns again a free imagination burst forth,—one that lived in the same moral world as Shakespeare, and felt keenly sin and hell and the passion of love.<sup>70</sup> Then came Wordsworth and Carlyle whose imaginations in spite of their imperiousness were too narrow and therefore became doctrinal rather than emotional. Since their time no big imaginations have really appeared. Victorian poets like Tennyson and Browning live indeed in Christendom in the same material-spiritual world in which all English poets have subsisted; but their emotions and their imaginative power are small. "To have had to write Macbeth would have killed such men as Tennyson and Browning";<sup>71</sup> for a great imagination must not merely dabble with a few spurts of passing impressions, but must have the power to disport itself within eternity and infinity.<sup>72</sup>

This gift of imperiousness of imagination is, according to Davidson, not possessed by modern poets largely because they have not the courage to look things in the face and to think as if nothing had been written in the past.<sup>73</sup> They conceive the world imitatively rather than genuinely and are merely literary echoes. They accept

<sup>68</sup> *The Triumph of Mammon*, p. 164.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>69</sup> *The Triumph of Mammon*, pp. 154-5.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

<sup>72</sup> *Mammon and His Message*, p. 160. "Imagination requires nothing less than the infinite."

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171. "We must know the best that has been thought and imagined in all ages, not for itself, but in order to avoid it, as we would avoid an exhausted atmosphere. Literature is the greatest foe of literature."

Shakespeare's vision of the Universe without really moving about freely in it. Heaven, Hell and Sin are real nowadays only to the Salvationist to whom Heaven is still an actual place of perpetual joy and Hell a burning lake with real flames in which the damned suffer eternal pain.<sup>74</sup> Though the modern poet does not believe in a literal Heaven and Hell he writes as if they were. He has no faith but he can offer no substitute for God and is afraid lest the world become a vacuum the moment he discards the machinery and symbols of a divinely created and guided world.<sup>75</sup> He thus lives in a world of symbolic shams and faint-hearted make-believes. If the modern poet could only dare to step out and cut loose from the past and find a substitute by creating a new habitation for the imagination that should be genuinely real to him and Universe-inclusive in scope, a new era would begin in poetry. The poet would then no longer be "literary" and reproduce impressions in symbols he does not believe in, and his very experience would gain in poetical significance because of the grandeur of his living imagination.

Impressed by this situation Davidson proceeds to erect a new dwelling place for the imagination on the basis of things that are real to modern man. According to Davidson modern man knows that there is no other world; that there is nothing immaterial; and that man is composed of the same elements that the distant stars are made of. This knowledge on the part of man is the factor that can make possible a new imagination: for if mankind will but contemplate the material origin of the universe, its ethical ideals and entire mode of life would change; and such change is bound to be accompanied by a new art.<sup>76</sup>

Religious ethical systems are based, according to Davidson, on certain conceptions of sin and obedience. By sin is usually meant violation of the laws of God for which disobedience punishment is meted out in a hereafter. But from the standpoint of a materialist there is neither Sin, nor God, nor Hereafter. Conviction of sin is merely the effect of physical exhaustion that follows a great discharge of force. When a man enjoys a pleasure he does not feel sinful; only when a state of exhaustion sets in because of lack of

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

<sup>75</sup> *The Theocrat*, p. 138.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76, and also *Dedication to The Testament of John Davidson*, p. 31.

energy or over-exertion does he have the "conviction of sin." It is therefore clear that there is nothing really bad in man's indulging in any kind of pleasure; though it is true that over-indulgence may lead to a reaction that is physically painful.<sup>77</sup> The origin of conceptions of Heaven and Hell can similarly be explained materialistically as misapprehensions of the "subconscious recollections of the peace of ether, of the glory of nebula, and of the condensation and contraction suffered by the matter of which man consisted during the millions and millions of years of the evolution of the solar system."<sup>78</sup> Matter has memory and passion; and oxygen, nitrogen and other constituent elements that make up man, have thus a dim consciousness of what had occurred before they entered into the makeup of man; and it is this dim consciousness misapprehended by man that led to conceptions of Asgard, Olympus and Heaven. Finally God Himself is merely this self-consciousness misunderstood. "The generative power of man and the all-pervading ether conscious in him, are the material sources of God."<sup>79</sup> Thus seemingly all religious ethics are founded on misapprehension.

Ethics should instead be based on the laws of matter. Good should be that which enhances the material power of self-consciousness in man who is matter's instrument of consciousness. There should be no cult of virginity because it is contrary to the cosmological processes of nature: The chief function of woman is to breed children.<sup>80</sup> Mankind should rid itself of the ascetic incubus; for material things are here to be enjoyed.<sup>81</sup> Let man not be afraid of his emotions and deeds. Let him do what he really wants and infinite greatness and infinite terror will await him.<sup>82</sup> Moreover man must not hesitate, in his endeavor to increase his capacities of consciousness and self-consciousness, to be hard on himself and on others. He must not be afraid to cause pain.

Pain?

It may be that matter in itself is pain,  
Sweetened in sexual love that so mankind,

<sup>77</sup> *The Theocrat*, p. 65.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>80</sup> *The Testament of John Davidson*, p. 140, etc.

<sup>81</sup> Vide accounts of Heaven and Hell in *The Testament of an Empire Builder* and in *The Testament of a Prime Minister*.

<sup>82</sup> *The Theocrat*.

The medium of matter's consciousness  
 May never cease to know—the solid bent  
 Of matter, the infinite vanity  
 Of the universe, being evermore  
 Self-knowledge.<sup>83</sup>

The big man should emancipate himself from subservience to the needs of the multitudes; for the great thing in life is not to lessen pain and increase the happiness of the many but rather to increase knowledge for the sake of knowing. The hero should be hard, misunderstood, and trusting his own instinct do for the world with love what he thinks good for it. Finally, man should know how to face death. The knowledge that there is no end, that there is nothing to fall back on but himself, the naked universe stripped of all illusions, should not terrify him. He should face a return to ether with joy, glorying in the fact that he will become in the nebula

“Essential fire, free from solitude.

This is the freedom of the universe.”<sup>84</sup>

These points of view which, according to Davidson, are an outgrowth of the knowledge of the universe, should guide man in determining the various modern social problems that confront him. He should thus oppose representative government because it is based fundamentally on the conception of the greatest good for the many rather than on the welfare of genius. But since the mania for suffrage does exist, Davidson thinks of stemming the effects of suffrage by limiting the male vote to married men who are householders.<sup>85</sup> The educational system should for similar reasons be changed: people should be taught only the things actually known, *i. e.*, the history of matter; for all other learning is based on illusions and must be done away with: the literature and books of the past are a curse. They may delight but they are in the way of seeing and feeling things afresh. The past must be undone; for

The rainbow reaches Asgard now no more;  
 Olympus stands untenanted; the dead  
 Have their serene abode in earth itself,  
 Our womb, our nurture, and our sepulchre.

<sup>83</sup> *The Testament of a Vivisector*, pp. 26–7.

<sup>84</sup> *The Theocrat*, p. 146.

<sup>85</sup> *The Testament of John Davidson*, p. 27.

Expel the sweet imaginings, profound  
 Humanities and golden legends, forms  
 Heroic, beauties, tripping shades, embalmed  
 Through hallowed ages in the fragrant hearts  
 And generous blood of men; the climbing thoughts  
 Whose roots ethereal grope among the stars,  
 Whose passion-flowers perfume eternity,  
 Weed out and tear, scatter and tread them down;  
 Dismantle and dilapidate high heaven.<sup>86</sup>

Socialism in so far as it is a leveling force should be crushed by the genius of the world. In so far as it is due to a feeling on the part of workmen of a lack of room in England to make the world to their order let them hive off and acquire new lands and fortunes of their own elsewhere.<sup>87</sup> Woman Suffrage should likewise be suppressed: Woman has intellect and man has intelligence; woman has ruse, chicanery, and nerve brain, and man has passion, instinct, and genius. In a conflict man the creator will triumph. Woman's place in life is that of a companion and child-breeder and not of voter. But since there is already this muddle of representative government, permit temporarily only married women who are mothers of three children the right to vote.<sup>88</sup> Finally, the Irish Question should be solved with a strong hand. The biggest type of man, according to Davidson, is the Englishman.<sup>89</sup> Things should therefore be so arranged that a solid English Empire be created: this can be done by granting autonomy to the Welsh, English, Highland, Lowland, Ulster, Leinster, Connaught, Munster; but all must remain English. "To live with England and yet to decline the destiny of England is to be unfortunate indeed."<sup>90</sup>

On the basis of such knowledge and application of principles of life, Davidson concludes that a new and really vital literature might be created. Because of the new ethics, the old tragedies of sin and conscience will become almost meaningless. The whole world will therefore have to be moulded afresh; for what was done in the past will be as nothing. Since men will dare to do things

<sup>86</sup> *The Testament of a Man Forbid*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>87</sup> *The Testament of John Davidson*, p. 17.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18. "The Englishman is the Overman; and the history of England is the history of his evolution."

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14-16.

without restraint of religious ethics, not only will new visions of terror and greatness be opened up,<sup>91</sup> but the very freedom of human conduct will create a life and art that will be full of a "youth and freshness more radiant and more fragrant than they ever wore even in their prime and pristine vigor."<sup>92</sup> Finally though this novelty of subject matter and life attitude will not affect the form of expression, for English blank verse is already "the profoundest and most intelligent voice of matter" and the "subtlest, most powerful, and most various organ of utterance articulate faculty has produced";<sup>93</sup> yet the poetry produced in the new universe bared of all illusions will be greater than that of Shakespeare because it will not be based on a mere symbol of the universe; it will be a statement in emotional terms of the universe itself.<sup>94</sup>

## V

The conclusions that Davidson herewith comes to are not fanciful or the outgrowth of a wanton desire to start something new. They are the product of his mature thought and satisfy a genuine inner want. The very errors on which his ideas are based are errors only because they are applied to poetry in general. They do not describe erroneously his own processes as a poet. He thus seemingly believes that an imperious imagination must, in order to produce the highest poetry, either visualize concepts of Heaven, Hell and God or else understand them materialistically. That a line like

Absent thee from felicity awhile

as Davidson claims, is the product of "some eternity of passionate emprise" may be true;<sup>95</sup> but that this eternity is the same as the keen feeling on the part of a poet of a particular philosophy of eternity does not necessarily follow. Great visions of terror and joy "that fill the mind with a sense of everlastingness" may be produced without the poet having had a vision of the Universe in the philosophical sense. That Burns must have literally felt (as Davidson implies) that he was living in a world "suspended by a hair from

<sup>91</sup> *The Theocrat*, p. 144.

<sup>92</sup> *Holiday and Other Poems*, p. 136.

<sup>95</sup> *Holiday and Other Poems*, p. 148.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>94</sup> *The Theocrat*, p. 52.



the floor of Heaven above a flaming Hell" in order to have produced great poetry in Christendom, is open to question.<sup>96</sup> That great poetry based on such a vision of Heaven and Hell might be written is of course true; but that such a condition is a *sine qua non*, is an unwarranted assumption. With Davidson, however, who was essentially a poet on metaphysical themes, such a vision of the Universe was an essential. Once he became definitely an atheist, he was compelled to reconstruct the universe so that it would harmonize with his lack of beliefs if he was to be genuine in the writing of his poetry; else his poetry which was becoming more and more an interpretation of the significance of life would have degenerated into cowardice of thought and emotional dishonesty.

It must likewise be realized that the fusion of materialism and Nietzscheism in Davidson's poetry has also a psychological rather than a logical cause. A materialist might deny the immortality of the soul and still accept in the main the ethics of the reduction of pain for the many. He might reason that since man has no other aid to depend on but that of his own kind, conduct that tends to increase the welfare of the majority is "good." He might even be tempted, owing to his conception of nature as a mechanical process and consequent denial of freedom of will, to look upon the ethical laws existing between man and man as inevitable mechanical regulations. But Davidson, notwithstanding his materialism, considers man as master of his fate and the highest good that which increases man's vitality or self-consciousness. He reconciles the irreconcilable by conceiving freedom as the accepting of the laws of matter and the working them out bravely. Furthermore, he accepts suffering as an inevitable detail in the process of evolution of matter into higher forms of consciousness and makes a cardinal virtue out of *amor fati*. Such conclusions on the part of Davidson are thus not necessary corollaries of his materialism: they are rather interpretations of his own sympathies offered in materialistic phraseology.

Moreover the monism of Davidson, woven though it be of ideas of others, is really an original product. Davidson is in his scientific ideas primarily a poet and not a scientist or philosopher. He argues indeed in favor of his hypotheses, but more often he enunciates things on the basis of his own authority. Things cannot be

<sup>96</sup> *The Triumph of Mammon*, p. 155.

known scientifically, he announces several times; they can be apprehended by poetic powers only.<sup>97</sup> He thus attains to unity with the subconscious universe by raising himself through poetry above experimentation and ratiocination. He accepts the nebular hypothesis because it is "the most satisfying to the imagination."<sup>98</sup> By a "leap across a chasm" with the "vaulting pole of hypothesis" he arrives at the conclusion that "light and sound are substantive."<sup>99</sup> He opposes natural selection largely because the thought of descent is repulsive to his imagination. He therefore prefers to believe that just as in the mind of a poet thoughts and imaginings of infinite variety arise, similarly "in the matter of the universe life in infinite variety arises and becomes; not by breaking up of species, but by the appearance of species the staple of evolution proceeds."<sup>100</sup> Because of a similar motive the creation of a new species of a louse is to him no proof of evolution by natural selection but rather "an instance of the material or imaginative style of matter in its mood of depravity—a mood analogous to that which produces *Sinon*, *Tartuffe*, *Parolles*, *Chivy Slyme*."<sup>101</sup> To a similar poetic transformation of thought is undoubtedly due his attributing intense passions to the elements; and his interpreting the universe as Memory rushing into Consciousness.<sup>102</sup>

Not only does Davidson thus transmute the scientific material that he appropriates into poetic fancy, but the points of view embodied in his conceptions, their scientific details notwithstanding, are distinctly amplifications of his own understanding of life. The poetry of *In a Music Hall* communicates already a taste for earthy material things; and the eclogues and ballads are already passionate searches for the meaning of life with a bias towards materialism. Problems of cosmology, heaven, hell and sin loom large in all his poetry of the early nineties; for his upbringing in the environment of the kirk made these problems the very essence of life to him. When he lost his faith in God his serious Scotch mind could not live in mere negation or assume permanently the attitude of becoming a mere "thoroughfare for all the pageantry of time."<sup>103</sup> His

<sup>97</sup> *The Theocrat*, p. 57; *Mammon and His Message*, p. 173.

<sup>98</sup> *Mammon and His Message*, p. 164.

<sup>99</sup> *The Triumph of Mammon*, p. 160.

<sup>100</sup> *The Theocrat*, p. 54.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>103</sup> *Ballads and Songs*, p. 34.

natural avenue of escape was a naïve materialism. That this materialism should have consisted largely in expounding modifications of Oswald, Haeckel and others is incidental, and was probably due to his early training as a chemist and to the popularization of energetic monism at the close of the last century.

The relationship between Davidson's own mental proclivities and the Nietzschean ethics that he adopts is of the same character. The resemblance between Davidson's ethics and Nietzsche's immoral ideals are indeed many and striking. Davidson seemingly accepts practically all of Nietzsche's cardinal ideas, such as the will-to-power, class morality and *amor fati*. He is merely non-committal about the Eternal Recurrence and opposes definitely only one conception of Nietzsche—that of the Overman.<sup>104</sup> The acceptance of Nietzsche's cardinal ethical tests is necessarily accompanied by an agreement with Nietzsche's corollaries on Socialism, government, woman, sin, asceticism, and Christianity. Even more close are the similarities between Nietzsche's views on art and Davidson's opinions on poetry. They both agree that poetry is essentially "the affirmation, the blessing, and deification of existence" and both oppose naked realism.<sup>105</sup> "Artists should not see things as they are; they should see them fuller, simpler, stronger"<sup>106</sup> might have been said by either. Both furthermore believed that poetic creation is the outcome of a tyrannical will which stamps its image on all things.<sup>107</sup> "To represent terrible and questionable things is in itself the sign of an instinct of power;"<sup>108</sup> "all art works as a tonic: it increases strength, it kindles desire (*i. e.*, feeling of strength);"<sup>109</sup> and "convention is a condition of great art, not an obstacle to it"<sup>110</sup> are sentiments expressed by both. Yet these numerous likenesses notwithstanding, Davidson can hardly be called a disciple of Nietzsche. In his later work he passes the Nietzschean ideas through a materialistic crucible so that they practically become amplifications of his own point of view: Human beings should indeed, as Nietzsche says, be hard and not hesitate to cause pain, but this time for a new reason, namely, that matter demands this hardness in order to attain self-consciousness. Similarly man is to be a yea-

<sup>104</sup> *The Testament of John Davidson*, pp. 17-19.

<sup>105</sup> *Will to Power*, II, 263.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 846.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 889.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 889.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 809.

sayer because all is matter and he should be proud of the fact that the entire universe is eager to become man. Finally man is to love the beauty and power of this world because there is no other world and such are the laws of matter. The chief reason why those ideas are adopted by Davidson is evidently because they harmonize with his own proclivities. As early as 1886, before he even heard of the name of Nietzsche, he already expressed a point of view approximating the Nietzschean in his play *Smith*. For Nietzsche's criticism of ethics is not so much a philosophy as a persistent emotional mood. Many of the attitudes, usually described as Nietzschean, were assumed, though with less poignancy and consistency, by many minds who preceded Nietzsche. Davidson felt some of those moods himself; and formal Nietzschean thought merely intensified tendencies that already possessed him.

It is thus out of his own emotional moods that Davidson constructed his "new" poetry. If monism and certain ethical ideals did become with him a source of poetry it was only because they enriched his consciousness of life and thus served as an emotional cause. But such a condition could not be produced by a mere arbitrary superimposition of a foreign system of thought on one's feelings. Philosophy in a poet becomes a potent factor only when it augments preëxistent emotional states. Such at least was evidently the case with John Davidson. Certain ideas with which he started out kept on returning in his works with a steady recurrence of waves; each wave encroaching with greater volume of added thought a trifle further in the same direction. Those points of view gradually became conscious processes with him; they gathered to themselves sinews and flesh from various sources and at last became a systematic living whole; and as such they influenced intimately and determined the character of his most important work.

The significance of the realization that the primary origins of Davidson's ideas lie in a personal disposition of mind rather than in systems of thought offered by others becomes evident the moment one examines the relationship between his philosophy and his poetry. They both have a common origin and are practically inseparable. A healthy mind assimilates indeed a great deal of material; but it selects and rejects new ideas and experiences on a basis of like and dislike. It culls those suggestions that harmonize with its own

tendencies and frequently constructs a system of thought that is really but an amplification of what it unconsciously felt before. Such at least seems to have been the process followed by Davidson in the development of his thought; whence its intimate relationship with his growth as a poet. There is thus a distinct continuity of ideas prevailing throughout all his work. Philosophic concepts were to him at all times a source of emotional strength and were usually presented as emotional attitudes. Even in his earlier work, as has been noticed above, the chief source of his strength was the search for the meaning of life. Since in his later poetry the greater keenness of thought in evidence was not a new current but an increase in the volume of a stream already flowing in his earlier work, there can be said to be no real change in the direction of thought or general characteristics of his poetry. His consciousness essentially metaphysical, invigorated by a thought that involved a general vision of the universe and a certain philosophic consistency, merely increased the intensity of his poetry. This increase of intensity is, however, very significant. Till Davidson created for himself his materialistic philosophy he was, his theory of art for life's sake notwithstanding, a minor poet struggling vaguely though passionately with a few modern situations and achieving a boat song in Scaramouch, a song or two in the eclogues, a few ballads suggestive of the turmoil of his age, and a few tender lyrics. In the main he was doing with slight variations, though with a sweetness and strength that was his own, what Henley and Kipling had already accomplished. He was a poet of "empire" verse; of London poverty; of the turbulent elements of modern thought;—with an intense love of life, and a passionate delicacy. Now, under the inspiration of an intenser thought, his former concepts broaden out and he becomes a nature poet in the Lucretian sense. He does not try to describe semi-literary moods aroused within him by the presence of sea or sky nor does he attempt to construct an ideal nature out of bits of impressions of the real world. Instead he recreates in his Testaments objectively and philosophically the world and its processes. The thick turf becomes to him "Cream of the earth uprisen through fathomed depths of soil and sap."<sup>111</sup> The thristle in his verse delights "to tune his throat with tortured snails" and

<sup>111</sup> *The Testament of a Prime Minister*, p. 49.

murderous singing birds "banquet sumptuously as nature bids."<sup>112</sup>  
 The endless processes of nature become his theme:

The green and sapphire earth embossed with studs  
 Of crystal snow at either lonely pole;  
 With orient dawn, with sunset in the west  
 The sumptuous rubies of its girdle clasped;  
 And wearing gallantly, day in day out,  
 Its azure mantle of ethereal dust,  
 That turns at night a sable domino  
 With stars embroidered.<sup>113</sup>

Attempts at putting modern scientific thought into verse were made in half-hearted fashion in English poetry before Davidson. Tennyson's "move eastward happy earth" and his exactitude of scientific knowledge in "Break thou deep vase of chilling tears That grief has shaken into frost" had already startled an earlier generation of readers. James Thomson, and even Robert Browning, likewise contribute their share in the poetic rendering of scientific ideas. But these touch the mere fringe. Davidson becomes *the* poet par excellence of natural creation. The creative processes of nature become the chief source of his inspiration. He dwells in a palace in the skies and sings of ether "eternal, stretching taut in bourneless space,"<sup>114</sup> "a sheer oblivious ecstasy"; of the wakening of the hungry lightning; of hydrogen's "first condensation of the infinite"; of passionate molecules swelling into "sumptuous nebulae"; of earth and neighboring worlds "shedding asteroids like a fiery sweat"; of "Earth delivered of its moon, And chilled without and tempered to endure Barbaric sculpture of the glacier."<sup>115</sup> Then he proceeds to sing of the sifting of the elements that become warp and woof of life; of telluric history and of the deluge of fire,

Compacture fierce and winnowing tides of air  
 That forged and tempered and engraved the earth  
 Enamelled it with sapphire seas and hung  
 An emerald veil about its nakedness.

He traces in fervent glow the origin of species: "sex from ether strained as lightning," embodied in protoplasm; life organical

<sup>112</sup> *The Testament of an Empire Builder*, p. 52.

<sup>113</sup> *The Testament of a Prime Minister*, p. 12.

<sup>114</sup> *The Testament of John Davidson*

<sup>115</sup> *The Testament of a Prime Minister*, p. 96.

speeding through differentiation "into the rose, the oak tree and the wine and unto men and women"; the brain, "the goal Unconscious lightning aimed at when it led The onset of eternity to man." Finally he reveals the very birth of the Gods and narrates their gradual destruction; the death of our earth that shall reel to its doom "orbit-slipped" or

The weight of ice amassed at either pole  
Shall change our axis till a deluge wipe  
The citted world away.<sup>116</sup>

As a poet of Nature Davidson is far indeed from being altogether successful. Though he places the entire world on his canvas and from a philosophic height judges everything that occurs within his ken, he cannot live long in the rare atmosphere of his heights. He fails to produce a single sustained effort in the manner of Lucretius. He expresses himself only fragmentarily in Testaments. Piecemeal he communicates that the world should rid itself of its past;<sup>117</sup> that man is made of the same substance as the furthest stars and should therefore lustily enjoy the world and not be afraid of life or pain, "the growing labors of the universe";<sup>118</sup> and that the other world is at last to be destroyed.<sup>119</sup> His visions of the processes of nature are presented in the Testaments and Tragedies only incidentally and spasmodically. He sees clearly only the outer causes of phenomena in their general outlines: but his vision of the details into which infinity disintegrates itself is often blurred. The precision that one does find in his work is frequently purchased at the expense of his becoming rhetorical or even through his producing mere prosaic cataloguing effects. His Hell is thus magnificently terrible in its general conception: he understands its suffering and interprets it with a tragic irony by making the "winnowing" space between Heaven and Hell mellow

the shriek of women and the roar  
Of men into immortal harmony.<sup>120</sup>

But when he comes to depict details, he offers an enumeration that

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>117</sup> *The Testament of a Man Forbid.*

<sup>118</sup> Testaments.

<sup>119</sup> *Testament of John Davidson.*

<sup>120</sup> *Testament of an Empire Builder*, p. 75.

is indeed impressive enough because of its sheer accumulative force, but yet resolves itself into mere rhetoric largely because the poet is perhaps in too great haste to deliver his message rather than sustain his imaginative powers by feeling intensely the details he visualizes. His poetry thus even in its highest moods frequently turns into violent rhapsody. This rhetorical quality is usually however the result of impatience rather than limitation of poetic powers and perturbs but slightly the general impression. In moments of calmer inspiration, Davidson's poetry has a grandeur of vision in the presence of which shrivels even Tennyson's "ambrosial air" that rolls "from the gorgeous gloom of evening" driving fancy "from belt to belt of crimson seas." Davidson's agonies of star dust fill the mind with a keener sense of everlastingness. His ability to view nature as a complete process disintegrating itself into mountains, oceans, flowers and men, works subtle magic into scenes conceived even on a smaller scale. The very declivities "that creep Unhonored to the ocean's shifting verge" communicate a feeling of suppressed energy due to a subconsciousness that the poet is aware that soon the willing earth will "leap to the bosom of the sun to be Pure flame once more in a new time begun."<sup>121</sup> Purged by this pure flame, a dignity of mood and restrained melancholy of thought permeates his work. The very deformities of men and women that he describes with startling energy cease to be ugly sickening details: they are sublimated into processes of nature. In the height of his vision there is no room for meaningless details or mawkishness of sentiment. His images become gaunt, exact, intense, honest. His largeness of conception is, moreover, uttered in a rhythm of blank verse that rises to the occasion and contains a dignity and sweep that is Miltonic.

The same grandeur of the scale of vision makes possible the construction of his later tragedies that are attempts at producing world-dramas in which the significance of materialistic thought is the theme. The limitations of those plays are likewise evident enough. They are largely polemics in dramatic form; for Davidson does not start out with definite conceptions of characters or dramatic situations that are to be fitted into a general scheme but deliberately composes characters and situations in order to convey

<sup>121</sup> *The Testament of a Man Forbid*, p. 29.



through them certain ideas. In *The Theocrat* the whole play thus resolves itself into message. Characters who hear the Davidsonian gospel are at once convinced; for the doctrine of materialism is "not to be apprehended but to be felt." Thus no serious attempt is made by Davidson in the play to reveal the process of character transformation or to trace rigorously the effects that this transformation produces on individual conduct. The most effective parts of the tragedy are those that contain an exposition of materialism and that attempt to appreciate the significance of religion as a cultural factor in the world's civilization. Davidson realizes clearly that all culture is based on some form of religion. He understands that the opposition to God will be fought by women "with babes at their breast" to the last drop of blood. All that have suffered—those whose children and lovers are dead—will rise to defend the other world.<sup>122</sup> It requires therefore great courage "to bid the dream avaunt once and forever." But though wars and convulsions will follow, the great truth must out; and the world will be thrilled with the splendor and terror of seeing itself without symbols. For in itself the universe is "a becoming, a passion and a pain, A rapt imagination." Davidson therefore hurls himself in passionate fury against the world, producing however as a result, not "a drama of church and state" but a rhetorical polemic containing here and there a few impressive rhapsodical visions.

The same limitations are evident in the uncompleted trilogy of *God and Mammon* in which he takes his task of producing a world drama even more seriously. His theme becomes definitely the difficulty of converting the world to a pure materialism and he tries to deal directly with the various existing forces of the present society. Prince Mammon slays his father, kills his brother, crowns himself king of Thule and marries Gwendolen. After delivering his coronation speech he quells a riot with machine guns. He is now ready to spread his message: and the harlots become indignant when they are informed that they have no souls. He informs the paupers that they must die; for he will have no poor, no incurables, no criminals and no bedlamites. There is moreover no longer to be the cult of age; youth should rule unburdened by a knowledge of the past. The abbot Gottlieb is tortured on the rack, for "to do the things One

<sup>122</sup> *The Theocrat*, p. 195.

fears to do is the first law of nature." The abbey is burned, "for it enshrines a lie" and all the beauty that came with Christianity—books, buildings, pictures, and the hearts of men must be annihilated. Money likewise must be abolished: "Churches and Banks together stand and fall." Such are some of the things achieved by Mammon who through his message "transcends all dishonor and all crimes and the utmost evil he could do."

The conversion to the faith is however far from perfect. The soldiers of matter enlisted in Mammon's cause cry "God save the King." Mammon himself suffers from lapses of conscience and "sees" the murdered bodies of his father and brother. None of his followers has the courage fully to accept the significance of his gospel. Oswald "loves and serves in fear and wonder"—but the torturing of Gottlieb on the rack, the burning of the abbey, and the betrayal of his affection for Inga finally drive him away to Mammon's enemies. Gwendolen "adores" him; but Mammon realizes that once her passion will cloy she too will desert him. Florimond follows him half in fear: in the presence of death he too becomes afraid of God and judgment. Indeed conditions are fast forming that would have enabled Davidson to show in the third part of the trilogy, that was never written, how Mammon eventually succeeded in "transcending the utmost evil that could be done to him." In spite of this seeming failure Mammon ruthlessly proceeds on his way to change the world. He muzzles the press and even suppresses all display of humor in order to accomplish his purpose.

The scale of this uncompleted trilogy is indeed titanic: its details are however sketched rather than clearly visualized. All the characters, with the exception of Mammon, are mere symbols of ideals that prevail in modern society—inceptors of Teutonic religion, neo-pagans, socialists, reformers, thieves, beggars, harlots, mobs. These symbols are not treated either lyrically or dramatically. They say indeed things consistent with the ideals they are created to represent; but Davidson has no sympathy to waste on them, whence the mechanical effect they produce. He does not create a single foe worthy of Mammon's steel because Davidson is evidently intoxicated with the joy of relating Mammon's message. The character of Mammon is limned however with bold precision.

He is heartless because universal. A true force, he does not calculate, and assimilates things as they come along, making them serve his purpose. The boldness of conception back of such character creation is imposing. The limitations in the complete realization of the character are largely a result of the enormous difficulties confronting Davidson in his conception of life.

He tried to conceive in his plays human conduct based on a new system of ethics. Poetry is usually informed by the ethics of the age in which it is produced. The penitence, resignation and wistfulness of Cynewulf, the very defects of his constructive style, are thus related to the scholastic thought of his time. Back of the Caroline poetry are the monarchic politics of Hobbes, his agnosticism and, above all, his materialistic metaphysics blended with the Epicurianism of Gassendi and the skepticism of Montaigne. Similarly the crude empiricism of the prosaic realism of the eighteenth century novelists, the optimism of an Addison, and the deism of a Pope, are related to Locke, Leibnitz, and Berkeley. With the change of moral conceptions a poetry containing new motives might of course be created, without such change precluding the possibility of the production of poetry celebrating the obsequies of ethical ideals of a previous age. But whether the old or new morality is employed, the poet must in either case make the reader sympathize with the given ethics: else the tragedy or comedy so created would become meaningless. One need not become a Platonist in order to appreciate Wordsworth's Ode on Intimations of Immortality; frequently a poem exerts its most artful charm when one feels that the thought which lies back of it is part of a faith that is dead; but even in such cases the poem will not move unless the reader can be made to sympathize with the mood that evoked the particular thought that one fails to accept. The task confronting a poet building on an obsolescent system of ethics or on one prevailing in a given age is comparatively simple. There is no difficulty on the part of the reader to whom the poet appeals in understanding the emotional significance of the moral standards employed. The poet who composes on the basis of an ethical system that is strange to most of his contemporaries must however either take it for granted that his readers are of the few who have already attained the new point of view and proceed calmly with his work; or, if he wants to appeal to

a wider circle, he must pause to denounce the past and make of the new standards the center of the emotional crisis of his character. If he follows the latter alternative he becomes either a propagandist and mars his play or else he must sacrifice the natural construction of the drama in order to make out of every significant detail of the new ethics an emotional crisis. Great artists have indeed circumvented such difficulties. Goethe has fashioned a Mephistopheles who is free of prevailing human tastes and Shakespeare has created an Ariel who is indifferent to human morality. But in the one case, Mephistopheles is a delightful villain for whom no sympathy is expected; and in the other, Ariel is a disembodied spirit evoking sympathy because he is an airy creature free of mortal cares. The central characters in *Faust* and in *The Tempest*, indeed the whole of both plays, is moreover conceived on an ethics that requires no formal exposition to be generally understood. But when in the midst of a world in which conscience, repentance, and pity are conceived as virtues a dramatist tries to construct a play fundamentally based on ideas through which these virtues appear vices, his task becomes artistically almost impossible. He might perhaps in a fashion write a novel based on such new standards; for the dispersed character of the novel permits digressions necessary to evoke at least intellectual sympathy on the part of the reader for those new ethical aspects. But the very construction of the dramatic form practically precludes these digressions and thus the sympathetic understanding of his new ideas. When Davidson therefore proceeds to create dramas based on a new moral philosophy he either cannot make his characters live consistently in his ethical world without pausing to make lengthy explanations that interfere with the action of his characters, or he fails to make the readers sympathize or even believe in the reality of the character's point of view. Largely for these reasons, though Davidson conceives the details in his tragedies on a grand scale, his lyric and dramatic powers break down the moment he tries to express himself in dramatic form: He is compelled to digress and consequently he produces rhapsodies and rhetorical polemics rather than a *Faust* or a *Peer Gynt*. The result achieved is however at worst a brilliant failure that dazzles with the effulgency of its rhetoric, a rhetoric that is impressive because of its passionate honesty and the daring of the ideas that it conveys.

Similarly impressive are Davidson's attempts at expressing himself at the close of his poetic career in lyric poems, ballads, and dramatic monologues. These briefer poems are artistically more successful than his plays because in them he can make a passionate plea for his ideas without the need of entering into digressions. The entire poem becomes from beginning to end a means of conveying a single undivided mood. The very novelty of his philosophic point of view, moreover, gives an intensity to the moods and emotions that he elects to express. In *Holiday and Other Poems* and in *Fleet Street and Other Poems* Davidson is thus enabled to portray life effectively from the standpoint of the poet who enthroned himself above the galaxy and understands the entire universe from a cosmic rather than human morality. The dominating tone in back of the *Holiday* volume is thus that it is good to be alive, for life is the reason why we are here. He furthermore announces again and again that the biggest conceivable thing is that which tends to increase vitality, the sheer courage for courage's sake. With mind all aglow he accordingly sings the brave hunting song of the runnable stag

Not to be caught, dead or alive,  
The stag, the runnable stag.<sup>123</sup>

In the new eclogues ether and nebula seem to have lit his blood and he paints in the colors of the dawn. Daisies are to him the "land wide Milky Way Of myriad eyes of day."<sup>124</sup> November is "one wet crimson stain";<sup>125</sup> "a crimson flood" intoxicates the east; and lilies are "on fire with newly budded love." Life is to him, however, not all blaze. From philosophic heights he can write at pleasure calmly of apple trees "heavy with apples And supremely contented"; for to them "Life is an effortless passion."<sup>126</sup> He can sing from his palace in the Milky Way of "London W.,"<sup>127</sup> its murmurs, cries and sunsets. All this he does with passionate intensity but not with violence. An occasional image in which daisies in the grass are likened to a "snowy leprosy"<sup>128</sup> may occur; but the poet himself condemns it as a slander. His revel in brave colors and fiery images is sobered by his vision of the totality of the universe.

<sup>123</sup> *Holiday and Other Poems*, p. 19.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

His poems lack however the freshness that some of his earlier work contained; and the frequent use of Poe's repetend in his versification certainly does not lend them any youthfulness. The repetend has indeed something elemental about it; for like parallelism it carries one back to the very beginning of poetry; but it savors of the simplicity of age rather than of youth.

In *Fleet Street and Other Poems* poetry is written from the same heights but it deals with the work-a-day world. It describes satirically the stupid mob in the "Crystal Palace" enjoying its holiday; the insufferable bores one meets on "Road and Rail"; the complacent forest folk; and the gutter merchants with their palsied souls and numbed affections. The drabness of the life of the railway stations seemingly enters his soul, and the hell of the unfit is lugged out for inspection. Davidson of the Fleet Street volume contemplates rather than feels the life that he sees. Accordingly he reasons, pleads, denounces, and expresses himself in parables that read like protestations of faith. This argumentative tone is seemingly partly the product of an apprehension that there be no one after him to feel intensely the full significance of the "message" that he wanted to deliver to his contemporaries. He indeed exclaims in his *Testament*:

I dare not die, must not die: I am the sight  
 And hearing of the infinite; in me  
 Matter fulfills itself; before me none  
 Beheld or heard, imagined, thought or felt;  
 And though I make the mystery known to men,  
 It may be none hereafter shall achieve  
 The perfect purpose of eternity;  
 It may be that the Universe attains  
 Self-knowledge only once; and when I cease  
 To see and hear, imagine, think and feel,  
 The end may come, and matter, satisfied,  
 Devolve once more through wantom change, and tides  
 Of slow relapse, suns, systems, galaxies,  
 Back to ethereal oblivion, pure  
 Accomplished darkness, Night immaculate  
 Augmenting everlastingly into space. . . .<sup>129</sup>

He is therefore determined to do almost anything in his power in order to express himself unmistakably and he writes accordingly

<sup>129</sup> *Testament of John Davidson*, p. 141.

satires and parables in the *Fleet Street* volume and explanatory prefaces, dedications and notes in his other works in order to supplement and interpret the thoughts expressed in his testaments, plays and briefer poems.

This stupendous conception of his own value is with Davidson not so much an outgrowth of arrogance as of despair lest he may have lived his hard life in vain; a sentiment tempered by a dread that soon he will be compelled "to turn aside and attempt things for which people will pay." When he is more hopeful the arrogant tone is transformed into a courage that slays every dejection and "seeth the abyss but with the eagle's eye." He remembers that even the most repulsive flesh is great because it dares to live. In the poem entitled *Fleet Street* this thought is brought out with special emphasis. The poet insists that *Fleet Street* with its noise, rapture and brick-work was once a silence in the ether. Perhaps in foul weather the patience of this brick-work gives out to the length of envying the "dazzling perdition" of Saturn's belts; if so, let the bricks be courageous and be proud of their telluric destinies; for they, too, are part of the cosmic whole. Moods of envy of each other's lots are bound to come but regular bricks "transcend them always." Similarly in his later elogues the poet reflects that "harvests in winter's bosom sleep." This courageous tone is expressed most effectively in a poem like his epilogue to *The Testament of John Davidson*:

I felt the world a-spinning on its nave,  
 I felt it sheering blindly round the sun;  
 I felt the time had come to find a grave:  
 I knew it in my heart my days were done.  
 I took my staff in hand; I took the road,  
 And wandered out to seek my last abode.  
     Hearts of gold and hearts of lead  
     Sing it yet in sun and rain,  
     " Heel and toe from dawn to dusk,  
     Round the world and home again."

.....

My feet are heavy now, but on I go,  
 My head erect beneath the tragic years.  
 The way is steep, but I would have it so;  
 And dusty, but I lay the dust with tears,  
 Though none can see me weep: alone I climb  
 The rugged path that leads me out of time—

Out of time and out of all,  
Singing yet in sun and rain,  
"Heel and toe from dawn to dusk,  
Round the world and home again."

Farewell the hope that mocked, farewell despair  
That went before me still and made the pace.  
The earth is full of graves, and mine was there  
Before my life began, my resting place;  
And I shall find it out and with the dead  
Lie down for ever, all my sayings said—  
Deeds all done and songs all sung,  
While others chant in sun and rain,  
"Heel and toe from dawn to dusk,  
Round the world and home again."

In such a swan song he gave expression to the fullest compass of his emotions; to a manliness, an ecstasy of metaphysical vision and a subdued tragic feeling aroused by his sense of eternity. It lacked but one significant quality that is to be found in many of his other poems: a genuine love of meadows and sky-larks, the tenderness and intimacy of which is heightened, particularly in his later work, by a violent passion for the productive elements of nature.

Imperfect as these later lyric poems, testaments and tragedies are, they represent not merely his maturest thought but also his most significant work. He personally considered these later productions as his greatest creations, and his opinion on the matter was unerring. That which he suggested unconsciously as a young man in his poetry in Scotland, and passionately strove to attain in the poetry of his growing manhood in the eighteen nineties, he definitely achieved in the full consciousness of his powers in his poems of the early twentieth century. In comparison with his more popular poems of the preceding decade his later work thus reveals a greater depth of vision, and intenser emotion and a greater hold on the understanding of the essentials of life. His technical skill displays a corresponding growth. He handles verse with more triumphant effectiveness. Blank verse is not only to Davidson "a supreme relief of nervous tension, the fullest discharge of emotion, the greatest deliverance of energy," but it communicates at its best to the reader a feeling of everlastingness and supreme contentment that one associates only with the most powerful and most permanent poetry. His later poems, especially the tragedies, contain indeed



many lapses into rhetoric and even bombast; but this bombast is not the result of deterioration of poetic powers. With a poet on metaphysical themes an increase in maturity of thought rather leads to a keener feeling of life and to a corresponding increase of poetic strength. The rhetoric in Davidson's later poems is largely the effusion of a mind overflowing with the bigness of its theme. It contains no clever conceits and no starched images: it communicates a directness of sincere passion. Davidson himself must have been aware of the rodomontade qualities of occasional passages. He must have composed them with the carelessness of a mind overflowing with creative energy. They are probably the result of impatience on the part of the poet to convey an unfamiliar thought, or of a determination to pause and explain his new ethics. It should be realized that this very philosophy that was partly responsible for Davidson's wildest rhapsodies and for prosaic catalogues of the elements, in moments of the calmer feelings was also the source of his most triumphant poetical achievements.

A contrast between the poems of "London" in *Ballads and Songs* and "London W." in *Holiday and Other Poems* perhaps best illustrates the nature of the growth of Davidson as a thinker and poet. Both poems are unmistakably Davidsonian in their mannerisms. Clouds that "Like smouldering lilies" are unconsumed, and sunsets that "well like crimson founts" might have been conceived by the poet in almost any period of his work. The London with its heart "beating warm" is, however, suggestive of Wordsworth's sonnet On Westminster Bridge and of the poetry on London composed in the eighteen nineties. Moreover a lyrical outcry like

Oh sweetheart, see! how shadowy,  
Of some occult magician's rearing,  
Or swung in space of heaven's grace  
Dissolving, dimly reappearing.  
Afloat upon ethereal tides  
St. Paul's above the city rides!

though perfect in its way and delicately suggestive of the poet's mood, yet lacks the compactness and maturity of mind evident in a "London W." In that latter poem there is nothing imitative and the lyric emotion is stronger because it is a product of a mind capable of a loftier vision. In it Davidson brings out with greater

directness the murmurs, cries, smoke, and hunger of a great city. Davidson accomplishes in such a poem what impressionistic painters have already realized in paint. For back of a passage like

Trees of winter's nakedness aware  
Gleamed and disappeared like things afraid,  
Dryads of the terrace and the square,  
Silvery in the shadow and the shade,

there is not merely a greater sensitiveness but a more direct feeling of open air. This directness is the product of a more intimate unity between the poet and the spirit of the scene that he describes. In the earlier poem Davidson merely portrays romantic emotions roused at the sight of London. In the later poem there is a firmer grasp of details and consequently a greater directness of emotion that are probably due to the poet's comprehending philosophically the unity of life. The poet's point of view, chastened by a philosophic understanding of natural processes, enables him to realize the ultimate significance of the details that he employs and he can thus communicate more intimately the spirit of the landscape that he portrays. Whether Davidson's philosophic attitudes really intensify his lyric powers precisely in this manner is of course a matter of speculation. Whatever the causes or processes may be, there can be but little doubt, however, that his later works are not only more philosophical in theme and in point of view but also display a greater compactness of lyrical expression and a profounder emotion.

Davidson recommends to the critic that he take out into the open that which seems to him poetry and thus discover whether it can bear daylight and experience of life. Davidson's own poems in the presence of mountains and fields do not lose in their genuineness. They can stand the test with which he proves others. Their effectiveness depends moreover not only on genuineness of feeling but on breadth of vision. Davidson had a mind that was essentially metaphysical; whence much of his poetry is full of a dignity that is sublime. Because the moods in most of his songs spring from a philosophic vision they not merely allure; they stimulate. His philosophy may be wrong but the emotion that it arouses is genuine and has a meaning to all who face things. If materialism is wrong, some other process is right; in either case the impending agonies of stars, the viewing of the world from an eternal aspect,

cannot lose meaning. There may be another world; and the soul, in spite of Davidson, may be immortal; but Davidson's *amor fati*, his determination to live bravely, are bound to have meaning as long as courage means anything to the human mind.

It is a simple matter to enumerate Davidson's limitations; for he tried to create in his later works the well-nigh impossible: a poetry based on an ethics that was new and almost meaningless to his generation. Staggering under such stupendous attempt, his mind was evidently in a continuous state of tension and was impelled by a desire of propaganda that was unfortunately not relegated to prefaces and epilogues. Goaded on by a lust for dissemination of doctrine and by a passion for scientific detail he frequently became prosaic or rhapsodic. His very satiric powers, in spite of an intense moral passion, thus became impaired. He moreover lacked the power of sustained thought and naturally sought expression in forms that are loose. He did not elaborate his poetic ideas patiently but turbulently burst forth again and again with a passion that overpowered the mind and the imagination but failed to hold them altogether prisoner. He could interpret well perhaps only one human passion—the search for truth. Finally from the standpoint of thought value—the quality that to him was most significant—his poetry was largely a record of failure to solve the great problems that tortured him throughout life. In his “pleasures of youth” he thus insisted that love is the secret of the world—a thought that survived in a modified form to the very end. His attitude towards love was semi-metaphysical from the outset. Even in his early poems love was conceived not as a touch of finger tips nor as a wanton lust but as an ecstasy of creative desire. She later became his mate and joyously journeyed with him “Right into the heart of the sun On the morning or evening tide.” But love failed to explain his universe; for the world's suffering gripped him—a ghost that he never laid. With pride he asserted in earlier days that a man is what he makes himself; yet the feeling that man can make himself only at the cost of suffering to others gnawed his conscience. Even after he had accepted in his later philosophy the seemingly inevitable by asserting that suffering—the whining of the rotting match girl—was the growing pains of the world that should not daunt, he still partly felt that he was evading an issue. Then the significance of sin, denial, and

the glory of the world demanded solution; and he finally evolved through his own thinking and reading a system that served him as an explanation. This system of materialism was based on moods rather than on well-reasoned scientific or philosophic thought. It indeed satisfied, no matter whether right or wrong, his imagination and gave to his poetry consistency of thought, grandeur of vision and intensity of form. It did not however enable him to create a new poetry in the sense that he conceived it. He only talked of a new pathos; but he really did not create it. His poetry was new only in the sense that all original poetry is new. It did not offer a statement of the naked world freed of all symbols and of all traditions, but rather expressed Davidson's particular moods—lofty, passionate and philosophic. But though his poetry was not “a new poetry for the first time in a thousand years” yet Davidson's significance is none the less great. His very failures communicate a sense of power. As a thinker he helped to stem artistic pose and unimaginative naturalism and through the invigorating robustness of his poems gave direction to the new movements in English poetry. Though his own work is not free from the tangle of rhetorical verbiage, yet his insistence on the need of genuineness of thought and emotion helped to clear the air of a great deal of imitativeness. His attacks on matter-of-fact realism and his endeavors to create poetry on a basis that harmonized with what he thought was the most permanent in the temper of his own time were healthy seminal tendencies of a big mind. Finally he has created some of the most daring ballads and lyrical poems of the late nineteenth century full of a tenderness and earthiness and passionate thought that are peculiarly his own. His semi-dramatic poems contain an exaltation, a rush of power, and a largeness of utterance that thrill with their vastness. His poetry on cosmology, full of fervor and grandeur of vision, undoubtedly occupies a unique position in English literature. He falls indeed short of the greatest. He saw however visions of great things and his failures are due to his not resting satisfied with anything short of eternity. The contributions that he offered to English literature are therefore living poetry and his memory will remain significant to all to whom daring of thought and genuineness of poetic feeling are precious.

August, 1914

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✓ Davidson earnestly requested in his last will the destruction of his letters and forbade the writing of his life. There are consequently no biographical notices worth mentioning. The biographical details offered in the Dictionary of National Biography and in the eleventh edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica are seemingly rewritings of the scant information to be found in "Who is Who." In Bookman, I, p. 85, a brief interview with Davidson is published. Accounts of his tragic end are to be found in the English Daily Press of March the 27th, 30th; April 1st, 19th; September 20th–22d, 1909. Several of the earlier poems are semi-autobiographical. His entire works contain a revelation of the most significant elements of his personality written large. ✓

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